

RURAL COMMUNITY PRACTICE: AN INTERVIEW WITH ALUN ROBERTS

Interviewed by Jean Ross

Thank you Alun very much for agreeing to discuss with me your current work in the Welsh community of Holyhead/Caergybi and Anglesey/Ynys Môn North Wales, United Kingdom.

Can you explain what your role is please?

I am the Business Support Manager for a local charity called Môn Communities Forward (CF) – Môn being the Welsh word for Anglesey – which is an island off the coast of North Wales (see Figure 2 below)

Môn CF has been going for about seven years now. We were actually set up to deliver a Welsh Government anti-poverty programme. So we wanted to identify what types of poverty we were dealing with which included all sorts of different issues like people's access to health services, family background and people's educational achievements.

We have access to information such as what school people went to and their achievements, family background where they came from, what sort of health issues in the family and access to medical services, access to jobs and employment. So just a whole range of information really, in terms of what was happening in communities. With this information we could see massive differentials between urban and rural areas. The difference was *stark*. So we decided right away on how we were going to tackle these areas of deprivation. Our thinking was to get the community to come up with the answers to the problems or the perceived problems. This was a bottom-up approach which in theory was empowering the community to come up with its own solutions.

A sum of money was allocated from the Welsh Assembly Government to kickstart activities where teams were established within the deprived areas with people from within the community being tasked to bring the community



Figure 1. Alun Roberts.
Source: Jean Ross.



Figure 2. S4C. Source <http://www.s4c.cymru/en/entertainment/dal-ati/page/197/anglesey/>

together and set priorities for action. We have noticed over the years there seem to be some issues which are specific to rural areas. For example, the provision of services, either they're not there, or they're very minimal. You have to have access to transport to go out of your own area into towns where there is a good concentration of services. The problem we have here in the County of Anglesey is that the provision of services is not brilliant. In rural Anglesey there are no General Practice Services, no hospitals, no major shops while bus services are infrequent or non-existence. So you're really isolated in these rural areas and that includes not just isolation from services, but medical, educational and other things including access to employment. Many of the people living in a rural area are suffering from poverty in many cases or just living above the poverty line. So what they need is access to transport, which in most cases, requires a car, which is normally quite costly.

There are a number of key themes community members feel strongly about such as access to services, opportunities for young people, access to employment and access to training.

So what we do now is we go to these rural areas, talk to the local people meet them regularly and be the link for them, so that we provide information about opportunities for work and entry training while linking to jobs in the community and find a way to match individuals with employers. We're fortunate here, because we have had regular government funding. We also work with the bottom up approach rather than a top down approach, where the community takes control, comes up with solutions for some of the key issues in the community. They are then empowered to make change happen. So in Holyhead for example we have a priority to engage with young people. So we now have provided a Youth Pod (see Figure 3 below) for them, which is a safe haven after school (ages 11 to 16 years) for three and a half hours Monday through Friday, where the young people can go and chill out. They call it a safe space, or a safe haven. With the young people they set the rules for the safe space. They are supported by three members of staff. But generally, the young people run the hub for themselves. And they decide what to do. They decide on the activities they want to get involved in and what they want to do. What training they need for themselves? So it's quite a valuable asset for them and they do appreciate it.

Some young people come every night after school, so it's their social life in a way outside of school. If they need some quiet time to open up with issues that might be affecting them there is an opportunity to do so. We also are able to bring in specialist agencies to support them for example mental health or sexual health. So it's an ideal place really for them to feel safe, also to open up in a safe environment. The nearest similar youth set up is almost 200 miles away. So we are really lucky here - others would like to have a similar space, but we also understand that one model does not fit all. What we need is to listen to the community, and work with the assets that they have. And the people that they have and what they want and develop a model that meets their needs.

So Jean you've asked me a little bit about myself, I'm very driven to make a difference. If I can, I'll actually think strategically, but actually deliver on a micro level, helping individuals on a day to day basis. You can't really beat that. So the individuals that you see become a collective. So over



Figure 3. The Pod.
Source: Jean Ross.

time you're actually supporting quite a few people. You need to get to the root of all communities. You can do this personally or you can find those community connectors, those people that connect with other people in their community. So you just talk to people and you find out who the key players in a particular community are. And so you try and find out what's going on in that community. So those connected people can connect with other people. And they all feel comfortable with you. You just collect all the information you can that is available, so you can get a good feeling about the community and most importantly you listen to people.

Alun Roberts, BA Business Administration was brought up in a small seaside village on the west coast of the Isle of Anglesey. He attended the local high school and progressed to higher education at the local university in Bangor. He did a B.A. degree through the medium of Welsh (which is his first language). His first proper job after university was as the Tourist Information Officer for the local authority in Anglesey. This gave him an excellent grounding and understanding of his home county. After a couple of years, he went into private business running an agency which offered self-catering accommodation within 800 properties on the Isle of Anglesey. Later he moved to work for a company in the construction industry as a commercial sales director before entering the world of supporting people who were struggling to find work. Over the previous 25 years he has been employed by a number of organisations such as Bangor University to utilise his local knowledge to support people into work or to establish new business ventures. He Chairs the only business forum in the county (Holyhead) and is a regular consultee in respect of community and business development in the county. He is currently looking at driving forward regeneration in one of the county's most deprived towns (Amlwch) which has been hit in 2019 with some major employers closing down operations or shedding hundreds of jobs.

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